



Play AT IT

Evaluation Report



LOTTERY FUNDED

Evaluation report on AbilityNet's Play AT IT project

Paul Ticher

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“Something that works, and something that helps.”

(Description of the Play at IT project by one interviewee)

Summary

This has been an excellently conceived and highly worthwhile project, described by one interviewee as “visionary”. It is almost impossible to fault the project, and one of the most common words to come up in interviews was “fantastic”. It has been well delivered, through the input of very modest resources and a lot of hard work and enthusiasm.

This project ran for two years, from April 2008 to March 2010. Its aims were to enable disabled children to use new technology to support learning through play, to allow them more choice and control over their play environment and to promote inclusion.

Eighteen nurseries (two in each English region) and 36 teams of early years professionals from a variety of settings were recruited. Each nursery was provided with a kit of equipment. The nurseries and early years teams received, staff training and support (especially through specialist assessment of individual children’s needs). They also had access to the AbilityNet loan bank of assistive ICT equipment.

The project clearly demonstrated the significant impact that assistive technology can have on individual early years children. Numerous case studies provided over the course of the project, as well as the comments of practitioners, attest to this. The project reached 1,700 children directly and many more indirectly through their shared use of the technology. Many children made progress at a rate which surprised both their parents and the professionals working with them. As well as learning specifically how to use the technology they were also able to participate more effectively in group activities and develop social skills.

The impact of the project went far wider than the children who immediately benefited. There was considerable awareness-raising among professionals and many nursery and early years staff gained confidence in the use of technology.

In the long term, many nurseries and early years’ teams have been inspired to continue delivering elements of the project, and some have obtained funding to do so.

The delivery of the project was exemplary, with high praise for the quality of the AbilityNet team. The design of the project was excellent, and the only disappointment with delivery was the occasional delay in providing training or carrying out an assessment, usually due to the difficulty of finding mutually convenient dates for all the staff – many of them part time – who needed to be involved.

The kit of equipment provided to each nursery and early years team was well-thought-out and effective, and provided very good value for a relatively low cost.

Nurseries demonstrated a wide range of activities and strategies, and showed that the 'package' from AbilityNet was effective in a variety of situations. Many nurseries provided clear evidence of the project promoting inclusion. In some nurseries a lack of confidence among staff in the use of ICT in general reduced their ability to make as much use of the kit as they would have liked, but all were emphatically enthusiastic about the potential of the project.

Some early years teams already had experience with assistive technology, but benefited nevertheless from the expertise and support of AbilityNet. The project also enabled them to make additional professional contacts, both locally and nationally. Whereas the work with nurseries was, inevitably, limited in its reach largely to the children attending that nursery, early years teams were able to reach considerably more children.

Background

This project ran for two years, from April 2008 to March 2010. It had five planned outcomes:

Outcome 1

Disabled children will experience new technological access methods to support learning through play.

Outcome 2

Disabled children will have the ability to choose and control their play environment through new approaches in play provision.

Outcome 3

Disabled children will have inclusive play opportunities, where they were previously often sidelined on account of their disabling condition.

Outcome 4

18 nurseries across England will have the necessary specialist equipment, ability and support to provide inclusive play opportunities to disabled children.

Outcome 5

36 local authorities teams of "Early Years Professionals" will be trained, supported and have access to an extensive Loan Bank of assistive ICT equipment, in so doing be able to provide inclusive play opportunities for disabled children.

In addition the funder set an additional target of bringing direct benefit to 1,548 children, and this was comfortably exceeded, with 1,700 benefiting during the course of the project (and of course many continuing to benefit after the formal end of the project).

It is worth stressing the emphasis on *inclusive* play. The primary beneficiaries of the project were to be children with disabilities. The equipment is designed to enable them to

join in activities which they might otherwise be excluded from. But the equipment can enhance the learning and play of many children. By encouraging others to use the equipment too, the project provided opportunities to avoid treating those with disabilities as special cases.

The planned recruitment took place, with two nurseries and four early years' teams in each of the nine English regions. They each received training from AbilityNet staff, access to the AbilityNet equipment loan bank and continuing support, both remote and on site, throughout the project. Each nursery also received a kit of equipment.

The main components of the project were:

- A kit of equipment provided to each participating nursery, containing hardware and software that was most likely to be of general benefit.
- Training from AbilityNet staff in how to assess children's needs and how to introduce and use the equipment in the kit.
- Individual assessments of children carried out by AbilityNet staff, either face to face or remotely.
- Access to the AbilityNet loan bank, whereby specific items of equipment could be loaned to individual children for a short period.
- Participation in networking opportunities for all those involved in the project.

Methodology

At the outset, the evaluator worked with the project staff to develop monitoring and evaluation tools. This meant that AbilityNet was able to collect information systematically about progress during the project. Each participant was asked to log its use of the equipment and to complete short reports quarterly and at the end of each year. Where possible, they were asked to provide case studies of how the equipment had been successfully used.

All this material was used by AbilityNet to monitor and manage the project, and was then made available to the evaluator.

The evaluator visited two nurseries to observe the equipment in use and speak to staff. Telephone interviews were carried out with staff from an additional two nurseries and from five early years' teams.

The impact of the project

The difference made to individual children

In their termly reports to AbilityNet all participating nurseries were asked to provide at least one case study of how the equipment had been used and the difference it had made. Other examples were recorded in interviews for this evaluation, in the observations of AbilityNet staff during their site visits and in presentations by project participants at events.

Cumulatively these amounted to a very impressive picture of the significant impact this project has had on the 1,700 children it has helped. Learning new skills to operate the equipment is only the start; most case studies go on to record the additional development that can then take place, either directly from the equipment itself or from the interactions that it encourages. In many cases there are increased opportunities for learning through play, and also for social and emotional development. Several nurseries described how the software can promote social skills – for example where more able children support and encourage those with additional needs in the use of the software once they have become familiar with it.

The impact could be surprising, even to professionals. One nursery interviewee said that their local early years team (not involved in the project) had been “shocked” by the rate at which children at the nursery were making progress with the help of the project, while an early years team had also been “surprised” at the impact in some cases.

It is almost impossible to overstate the effect that assistive technology can have. One interviewee said: “Parents think it is fantastic. Everyone has been surprised at what the children could do [with the help of the technology] and were often in tears.”

Assessments

An important element of the project was that each child had an individual assessment to identify the most appropriate technology for their specific needs from the wide range available. Although these assessments can be very time-consuming, finding exactly the right support makes a significant difference. Some interviewees gave examples of provision they had experienced previously which was less effective and a waste of resources because it wasn’t appropriate for the individual child.

Initially many of these assessments were carried out by AbilityNet staff (either remotely or face to face), but staff from participating nurseries and early years teams were also provided with training and encouragement to develop the skills to carry out assessments themselves. Those with more experience, who were already able to carry out assessments, still valued the contribution that AbilityNet staff were able to make.

To emphasise the effectiveness of assessments even when carried out remotely, it is worth quoting the feedback from one portage service: “Just thanking you for the great remote support session this week. I found it really simple and easy to set up, considering my lack of computer skills. Step by step instructions were really easy to follow, the family and child are really excited about the use of the touch screen and it will make a great difference and expand on the skills this child has already learnt. I will be referring more children and families to your service as I found it hassle free.”

One of the most telling comments on the assessments was that for many children, and their parents, this was the first time the children had been assessed on what they *can* do

rather than on what they *can't*. This in itself, although it may appear minor, is another very positive outcome from the project, with a profound effect on the parents.

Wider impacts

Although the focus of the project was, quite rightly, on the 1,700 children who benefited directly, the impact went far wider.

Many of the participating nurseries serve mixed ability children. While the technology directly benefits the individuals it is provided for, these were often only perhaps two or three out of 30, 50 or even 100 children attending the nursery. Many of these other children were able to learn a range of social and educational skills from playing with the equipment, as well as experiencing greater inclusion of those with disabilities. The total number of children who benefited in some way is therefore impossible to calculate, but must be in the tens of thousands.

Mention has already been made of the impact on parents, and their pleasure at seeing what their child could achieve with the help of the technology. One case study also mentioned that, as a direct result of the project, a mother was able for the first time to make and drink a cup of tea while looking after her child. Previously the child had not been able to concentrate on anything for long enough to allow her to do this.

Awareness-raising also increases the spread of the project. Nurseries were encouraged to provide open days for parents and professionals to see the technology and hear about how it was being used, while early year's teams also had a specific brief to spread the word as widely as possible. Through this many people now have a much better idea of what is possible and what is available, either for their own children or those they work with.

Finally, there is the impact on the staff involved, themselves. Many interviewees reported that the project had raised not only their awareness but also their confidence in carrying out assessments and making use of assistive technology.

Long-term impact

Many interviewees expressed sadness that the project was coming to an end, but foresaw a lasting impact, not only from the continued availability of the kits of equipment and from increased awareness of assistive technology, but also because of practical measures that had been taken in some areas.

A significant proportion – three of five – of the early years teams interviewed had managed to obtain long-term funding to replicate elements of the project locally. One described how they had been so inspired by the project that they had made a concerted effort to raise money from charities so that they could continue to provide a service. The combination of knowing what kit to buy – for the portage service, for SEN and for children's centres – and having the capacity to do assessments meant that they expected to be able to reach the majority of families in their local authority area. From the small

scale project they had been able to “take the message and run with it”. Although the sums of money involved were relatively small, they would never have got this far without the project.

Nurseries were less confident of being able to continue to make the same level of provision, although all were keen to do what they could. One interviewee made the point that staff turnover is low, and the reports from other nurseries generally support this, so that at least the learning from the project will persist for a reasonable length of time.

Project delivery

There was considerable praise from participants for the professionalism and efficiency of AbilityNet’s staff, coupled with a sensitive and caring approach to the children. The staff were said to be “very powerful” in presenting the project to professionals, “very friendly and helpful”. Their positive attitude is reflected in one comment that they “never said ‘Oh no, we can’t do anything for this child’”.

One comment came up many times without prompting: the conscientiousness of the staff in returning phone calls and getting back to people when they said they would. While this may appear obvious, it is a credit to AbilityNet that they take this aspect of customer service seriously. They were also praised for being prepared to tailor their training on request.

It is also worth pointing out that the staffing for the project was modest and it was deployed very efficiently, for example through the well-thought-out use of remote tools for assessments and meetings.

In terms of numbers, the project exceeded its target for the number of children to be helped and involved the planned number of nurseries and early year’s teams.

The design of the project was excellent, reflecting the long and detailed experience of AbilityNet. The interviewees were unanimous that the ‘package’ – the kit, training, assessments and loan bank – was right.

The only disappointment in delivery was occasional slow progress. There were mentions, in particular, of delays in delivering training because of the difficulty of finding convenient times, and of having to wait for assessments to be carried out. Reports also commented that raising the profile of assistive technology locally and making links with other professionals proceeded slowly too. Several interviewees acknowledged that in retrospect they wished they could have done more.

These delays were largely unavoidable given that the project was an additional task for staff in nurseries and early year’s teams who are already busy and often working part-time.

The kit of equipment

The kit of equipment provided to each nursery and early year's team was well-thought-out and carried out two important functions. Primarily, of course, it was available for children to use, and the hardware and software it contained had wide uses for many children. The kit was the key tool that supported inclusive play, since it was available on demand in each setting and could be used by all children rather than being allocated to a specific one. The software, for example, was described as "motivating and encouraging" to the children with disabilities and other youngsters.

The second function was as a support for training and an aid to awareness. Several interviewees mentioned that awareness training without the kit would have been less effective. Knowledge on its own is not enough; it makes a big difference actually to see the equipment and software in use, and to see the difference it makes. This was equally true at open days and other outreach events where the presence of the kit again reinforced the message about the range – and often simplicity – of the options for supporting inclusive play.

Several interviewees commented that the kit provided extremely good value for a relatively low cost. While circumstances dictated that occasionally there was no demand for one or other item, in most cases a high proportion of the kit's contents found its way into use. Although individual items can be beyond the budget of a family (see the discussion of the loan bank, below), several early years teams indicated that having seen the appropriateness of the contents of the kit they could now justify acquiring similar kits from their own funding.

Nurseries

The 18 nurseries in the project varied considerably. Some were small nurseries catering mainly or exclusively for disabled children and those with additional needs. Others were specialist units within a larger nursery, or community-based nurseries serving a wide range of children. In some, the children mostly attended regularly for a whole academic year at a time, while in others the attendance was intermittent or regular but only once or twice a week.

The package provided by AbilityNet under this project – the kit, training, assessment, support and loan bank – clearly had the potential to work well in all settings, indicating how effectively it had been designed. Even specialist nurseries where the staff was already familiar with assistive technology reported that the project had motivated staff and given an additional impetus. The kit had also highlighted what was available and encouraged them to evaluate their existing provision.

Not only were the nurseries different; in comparing their reports it is striking to note the wide range of different activities and strategies adopted, according to the needs of the children and the confidence level of the staff. Although the project is delivered as a package, there is scope within it for enormous variation.

The enthusiasm of nursery staff for the project was clear. Although some mentioned not being able to use the equipment as often as they might have liked, because of the pressures on their time, they were still keen to praise the project for what it had achieved.

The nurseries also indicated clearly that assistive technology does support inclusion. Examples were given of how the technology makes possible activities that involve a number of children, and allow those of all abilities to participate. Because they are using the same software, and sometimes hardware, just at different levels, it removes boundaries and barriers between the children. In one nursery several children with difficulties in speech, language or concentration were able to benefit directly from using the software in the kit. In another, a child with cerebral palsy now has a range of ways of interacting with the computer, and is able to create work which they can print out and keep as a tangible record, in the same way as the other children at the nursery create work they can take home.

Some nursery staff commented on the difficulty of ensuring continuity when children who have successfully been using equipment in the nursery move up to school, if the school takes a less positive approach to assistive technology.

Materials provided by AbilityNet enabled nurseries to record and analyse what they were doing in support of individual children. The case studies they included with each of their routine reports provide an impressive – and often very detailed – testimony both to the amount of work put in and to the impact the project has had on individual children.

Possibly the largest obstacle within nurseries – mentioned in several visits and interviews – is a general lack of confidence and skill in using ICT, and sometimes a lack of technical support. This is a much wider issue, which the project was obviously not set up to tackle.

Several early years teams also commented on the value of the project in raising the confidence of the staff in nurseries and other settings. One added that it takes a lot of confidence to be able to use the assistive technology in an inclusive environment, and that some nurseries found that they needed to use the kit out of the main room, with fewer distractions.

Most nursery staff do not have the confidence, training or experience to do their own assessments, although in at least some specialist nurseries the staff do have this capacity. For most nurseries this means that that access to an assessment service – whether from AbilityNet or another source, such as the local early year's team – remains a requirement for the foreseeable future.

The project anticipated that one benefit of having the equipment and trained staff in nurseries was that other professionals could come along and see what was available and possible. Almost all the nurseries reported that this had happened to some extent, but many also felt that it had taken longer than expected to get the word out, and that this

promotional work is an area that could have received more attention. One interviewee, while regretting the lack of time to do outreach, did point out that much of the awareness-raising took place informally – perhaps in a passing discussion with a SENCO, for example – and would not have appeared in the reports on activity that were submitted.

Early years professionals

The 36 early year's teams were recruited to the project on the basis of expressions of interest. As a result, while they were distributed all over England, some regions had more than four teams involved and some fewer, but all those involved were committed to the project.

Most teams had both an educational and a disability brief, although they differed to some extent on their focus. In some cases AbilityNet was able to support existing initiatives and provide, in the words of one interviewee, a "great model on a plate" which was a "springboard" for further development. Others had less previous experience or confidence with introducing assistive technology.

In many cases the input from AbilityNet was sufficient to give the team the capacity to carry on where the project left off and cascade the knowledge and confidence to other early year's professionals in the area. One interviewee said that the project had been "a real driver for change".

Early years teams can extend the reach of the project dramatically. One had trained 30 staff under the project, each of whom had regular contact with around 20 children. These staff were now much more confident in bringing assistive technology into their work routinely, and the project had broadened their horizons. Another interviewee felt that the amount of training was crucial: the project worked better in their portage service, where staff received an additional day's training and were more confident in carrying out assessments. In the nurseries that were being supported by the early years team, the staff received less training, and were then less confident in asking for an assessment (as well as less confident in the use of IT generally).

Another theme that emerged from interviews was the breaking down of barriers between early years and five-plus schooling. In one case the early years team has now appointed a member of staff to carry out assessments, whose expertise will also be made available to schools. Another interviewee agreed that the project had a significant impact, not only on the children's development, but also on their transition to school.

In one case the interviewee reported that lack of resources – both time and funding for equipment – affected the team's ability to make the best use of the project and resulted in some children's needs not being met. They also reported that having someone with the necessary IT skills was not a priority for their service. This example seems to have been an exception, but it does indicate some of the very real obstacles that may have to be

overcome if a programme such as Play at IT were to be extended across a wider range of services, especially if they needed persuading of the value of the provision.

Another important impact of the project was in strengthening professional contacts. Many participants reported that the events organised as part of the project had brought them into contact with like-minded professionals, both locally and nationally, and that they had developed longer-term working relationships as a result. The regular tele-conferences for participants in the project had been “very interesting” for one interviewee, and she saw additional opportunities for being more proactive in developing and sustaining these links.

Loan equipment

The availability of equipment from AbilityNet on free loan is a vital part of the project. Children only start to benefit when they actually use the equipment they have been assessed as needing. In some cases the equipment was already available in the kit provided to each nursery, but in other cases a specific item from the loan bank was required.

However, the loan bank is based on the idea that users have the equipment for a trial period only – in the case of adults just a few weeks. Recognising that this would not be long enough with children, the project negotiated an extended period of three months. This was later reduced to two months because of the popularity of the scheme, although in some cases a follow-on loan period was possible if the equipment was not in demand elsewhere.

In all the loan bank received 242 requests and loaned 538 pieces of equipment.

Probably the main regret about the project was that the loan equipment could not be available for longer. When asked if there was anything that should have been done differently, by far the most common response was to extend the loan period.

Many interviewees commented that the children were just starting to make progress when the equipment had to be returned. Often, because of staffing constraints, or because children attended nursery only once or twice a week, it was just not possible to fit in enough sessions with the equipment while it was on loan and the children had not obtained the full benefit from the equipment when it had to be returned.

Despite this, the loan bank was seen as valuable. One interviewee commented that “knowing it’s there is wonderful” and another said, “We were sad to see the lovely equipment go”.

One interviewee stressed that the parents and staff involved understood the reasons for the equipment having to be returned, and were supportive of other parents and children in their situation getting a turn.

The cost of buying equipment themselves after the loan period is out of reach of all but a few families, and it is not easy to obtain funds from other sources. Only one interviewee felt that providing assistive technology to individual families was a “luxury”, given the difficulty they had in finding the money for more basic provisions such as specialised seating.

As a result, the project did at times risk raising people’s expectations, only to find that they could not be supported for as long as they needed. On the other hand, it is worth noting that the number of loan requests was only about one in seven of the children directly benefiting from the project, suggesting that six out of seven had their needs met from the kits provided to nurseries and early year’s teams.